

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Vision Statement

The designated Iowa portion of the Mississippi River Trail (MRT) will consist of a world-class, continuous multi-use, non-motorized, on-road and off-road route running from New Albin at the Minnesota border to Keokuk at the Missouri border. The Iowa portion of the MRT will be well-marked using special MRT signage, will be located as close to the Mississippi River as is practical, and will traverse a scenic landscape. The Iowa portion of the MRT will also provide adequate cultural, recreational, tourism, hospitality, retail, and educational opportunities for users and usable surface, bridge, or ferry connections to other Iowa trails and trails in bordering states. Iowa's MRT will serve as a destination as well as a non-motorized transportation route. The Iowa portion of the MRT will be designated for expedient implementation; there may be temporary routes that are changed at later dates as improvements are made.

This plan for Iowa's portion of the Mississippi River Trail is for rural segments of the trail (portions not within urban boundaries) and is intended to be a dynamic routing. This "recommended" routing of the MRT in Iowa is based upon safety analysis, trail amenities, and trail development concerns, as well as on existing, programmed, or planned facilities and other criteria. This routing includes both bicycle lanes (on-road facilities) and bicycle trails (off-road facilities) and is expected to change over time as new off-road bicycle trails are constructed and joined to the MRT.

Objectives

The following objectives for the Iowa MRT were created by the Mississippi River Trail Advisory Committee for the planning and implementation of the Mississippi River Trail in Iowa.

Continuity

- Designate and improve a system of on-road and off-road trails that run continuously from New Albin to Keokuk.
- Designate routes that allow for surface, bridge, or ferry connections to MRT routes in adjacent states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri).

Proximity to the Mississippi River

- Designate routes that are as close to the Mississippi River as is feasible (within one mile in urban areas and cities over 10,000 population and no farther than 10 miles from the river otherwise).
- Designate routes only in counties adjacent to the river.

Suitability for Cycling

- Evaluate all potential routes and indicate those that are suitable for average cyclists (Level B) and those that are only for advanced cyclists (Level A).
- Designate on-road routes that have above average bicycle compatibility index (BCI) scores or bicycle level of service (BLOS) ratings.

Safety for Cycling

- Designate routes that should provide reasonable safety conditions, as indicated by measures such as BCI and BLOS.

Feasibility and Constructability

- Designate new routes that can be constructed and maintained at a reasonable cost.
- Determine the most likely governance (e.g., ownership, maintenance, and operation) for all designated segments.

Scenic Quality

- Designate routes that are scenic and that provide a variety of scenery, including already designated scenic byways where possible.

Access to Attractions and Services

- Designate connections that provide access to tourism, recreational, and educational activities.
- Designate routes that provide access to services, hospitality, and retail trade needed by cyclists; services will generally be located in towns, urban areas, and cities.
- Explore the relationship of routes to complementary passenger transportation modes.

Implementation

- Move from planning to action quickly.
- Sign currently suitable routes as quickly as possible.
- Identify gaps that can be filled quickly.
- Tap existing funds for rapid development.
- Identify a list of possible demonstration projects for federal funding.
- Promote a higher level of accommodation on existing and new primary roads, county roads, and city streets.

Implementation and Coordination with Other Trail Systems

This section details the relationships and connections that the Iowa portion of the MRT has to other states' segments of the MRT, other trail systems in adjacent states, and other key bicycling facilities in Iowa.

Implementation in Other States

The Mississippi River Trail is a nationally designated trail, routed through a variety of states from the Minnesota headwaters to the Gulf of Mexico. As such, the trail requires these states to cooperate through the design, implementation, and maintenance of this facility. The MRT states can work together to create a bicycle trail that takes advantage of the most assets each can offer. Connections can be made to adjoining states for cycling tourists to take advantage of multi-state resources, or to link citizens of one state to work or entertainment in another state.

The placement of the Mississippi River Trail in neighboring states can influence the trailheads of the MRT in Iowa. For instance, the state of Minnesota has planned to end the Minnesota segment of the MRT at the Minnesota-Iowa border on State Highway 26. For this reason, the Iowa MRT will begin at the city of New Albin, a city at the Minnesota border and on Highway 26. The Iowa north trailhead of the MRT is clearly a continuation of the Minnesota trail planning efforts; if Iowa had not communicated or connected to Minnesota's trailhead, valuable time and resources would have been used in attempts to link the two mismatched trailheads.

The Iowa south trailhead has not been precisely planned, for the state of Missouri has not completed their Mississippi River Trail plan. The Missouri MRT route currently ends at the city of Hannibal. This Iowa MRT plan recommends that Iowa's south MRT trailhead be located in the city of Keokuk, Iowa. The state of Missouri will be expected to route their trail to Keokuk to match the Iowa segment of the MRT, much like Iowa did to match Minnesota's segment of the trail.

Other Trail Systems in Adjacent States

The Iowa MRT segment could connect to trail networks in other states through careful planning.

The state of Wisconsin, bordered by the Iowa counties of Allamakee, Clayton, and Dubuque, has a dense trail and ride-the-road network that Iowa MRT cyclists may want to access. To better facilitate this action, the ferryboat river crossing at Cassville, Wisconsin is recommended for Iowa MRT cyclists to access the Wisconsin bicycle facilities.

The Iowa counties of Dubuque, Jackson, Clinton, Scott, Muscatine, Louisa, Des Moines, and Lee border the state of Illinois. Illinois also boasts a dense trail network, including the Grand Illinois Trail, a 475-mile-long recommended trail, looping from the Mississippi River to Chicago. There are many possibilities for Iowa MRT cyclists to access these trail networks, either by ferry or bridge crossings. Between the cities of Dubuque, Iowa, and East Dubuque, Illinois, the Julien Dubuque Bridge on U.S. Highway 20 is a possible bridge crossing to Illinois for cyclists. In addition, the future construction of a companion bridge to the Julien Dubuque Bridge could include bicycle and pedestrian accommodations. Another potential river crossing is in the city of Clinton. The North Clinton Bridge on State Highway 136 is a possible crossing to Fulton, Illinois. In the Quad-Cities, the Arsenal and Centennial Bridges may be used as connections to the Illinois Quad-Cities trails. The possible replacement of the existing Interstate 74 Bridge could also include bicycle and pedestrian accommodations to create more linkages between Iowa and Illinois trail systems. In addition to the bridges, the bicycle-friendly Channel Cat ferryboat runs from Bettendorf to the Ben Butterworth Parkway, a two-mile-long park in Moline, Illinois. Finally, in the city of Keokuk, the Highway 136 bridge is a potential river crossing for Iowa MRT cyclists wanting to access Illinois trails.

Other Key Trails in Iowa

The Iowa portion of the Mississippi River Trail is structured to incorporate existing and programmed local and state trails into its design. There are several trails in the vicinity of the recommended Mississippi River Trail that offer MRT cyclists opportunities for unique side trips.

Heritage Trail

The Heritage Trail is a 26-mile trail in Dubuque County, extending from the city of Dyersville to the city of Dubuque. The trail is located in a scenic area of northern Iowa, routing through forests, plains, and prairies. Along with these amenities, the trail also provides a tour of Iowa's geological beauty through nearby caves, bluffs, mines, and river views. The Heritage Trail is being extended into the city of Dubuque and through the Mines of Spain; this trail expansion is recommended to be the MRT routing through Dubuque.

American Discovery Trail

The American Discovery Trail is a planned coast-to-coast non-motorized trail, from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. The American Discovery Trail, like the MRT, is designated as a National Millennium Trail. The trail overlaps the Mississippi River Trail from Davenport to Muscatine. The American Discovery Trail is not completed at this time but may use many of the same routes as the MRT when completed. The routes projected to be shared between the MRT and the American Discovery Trail in this area include urban Quad-Cities trails and selected routes to Wildcat Den State Park in Muscatine County.

Hoover Trail

The Hoover Trail is part of the American Discovery Trail and is a trail project in progress. It is slated to begin in Cedar Rapids and is envisioned to continue south of Burlington, possibly sharing a route with the MRT. However, the southern end of the trail has not been completely planned. The Hoover Trail may not have any overlapping trail with the Iowa MRT, but it does supply another side trail from the MRT for cyclists wanting to travel on a different route.

Urban Trails

In addition to the mostly rural trails outlined above, many cities along the MRT route offer urban trails systems. The larger Iowa cities along the Mississippi River are in various stages of trail development, from a comprehensive network (Quad-Cities) to no major trail system (Fort Madison). However, most of these cities have recognized the importance of providing multi-modal transportation in their communities, and are expanding or developing new trail systems.

Many larger cities along the recommended Iowa MRT are developing or expanding their trail systems. As mentioned previously, the city of Dubuque is expanding the Heritage Trail through its downtown area and through the Mines of Spain. This trail expansion will utilize Dubuque's existing trails and will also open up the downtown area with its many amenities to MRT cyclists. Also, the connection through the Mines of Spain will enable cyclists to learn about the area's first settlers and early mining efforts in the area, as well as enjoy the wildlife and natural beauty of the park.

The city of Clinton currently has a riverfront levee trail and has recently expanded its bicycle facilities by providing a sidewalk alongside U.S. Highway 67/30 through parts of the city. In addition to these facilities, the city has recently constructed a new parkway and has recommended trail construction alongside it in the future.

The Quad-Cities area has been planning major trail expansion projects to complement an existing comprehensive trail network. The cities of Davenport and Bettendorf have an almost-complete riverfront trail system, along with a large off-road trail along Duck Creek in the cities. To complement the finished segments of riverfront trail, the Quad-Cities have programmed the construction of a new riverfront trail to connect the segments and create a complete route along the river through Davenport, Bettendorf, and Riverside. In addition, a trail will connect the western trailhead of the Davenport riverfront trail to the city of Buffalo. Also, trail facilities are being planned in the cities of Le Claire and Princeton to the north of the Quad-Cities.

The city of Muscatine currently has a riverfront trail. Muscatine County has planned a large-scale expansion to the riverfront trail system, but this network is not expected to be completed by the opening of the MRT.

The cities of Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk all have very small amounts of urban trail, if any at all. The city of Burlington has a few small trails and is looking at potentially expanding those facilities. Fort Madison has recently constructed a short trail in a riverfront park but is examining the possibilities of expanding the trails further. The city of Keokuk currently has no trails of notable length, but the city's design favors cyclists who want a view of the Mississippi River; the riverfront is filled with old residential areas and the traffic in these sections of town is low, providing safe on-road facilities for cyclists.

Attractions and Services

This section details the relationships and connections that the Iowa portion of the MRT has to tourist and other attractions and service centers.

Tourist and Other Key Attractions

Each county along the recommended Iowa portion of the MRT offers a wealth of attractions that may interest MRT cyclists. Many varieties of attractions exist along the MRT, from parks to prairies, from riverboat gambling to shopping centers, and from local historic sites to museums.

Allamakee and Clayton Counties offer a variety of forests, refuges, and local, county, and state parks. The MRT will take advantage of these areas, traveling near Yellow River Forest in Allamakee County, Effigy Mounds National Monument in Clayton County, and Bloody Run County Park and Pikes Peak State Park in McGregor. In addition to natural areas, Allamakee County boasts a river history museum and an exotic animal ranch. Clayton County also contains local historic sites, local history museums, specialty museums, a fish and wildlife refuge, and a riverboat casino.

Dubuque County offers a great variety of attractions to MRT cyclists; this metropolitan area contains activities to please most any type of tourist. The main parkland along the Dubuque County segment of the Iowa MRT is the Mines of Spain, as mentioned previously. In addition to parkland, Dubuque County has many other types of entertainment possibilities. Dubuque County also offers historic sites, a farm toy museum, an art museum, Fenelon Place Elevator, Cable Car Square, and the Dubuque Ice Harbor, which holds a riverboat casino and a greyhound park, among other activities.

Jackson and Clinton Counties also provide unique amenities to MRT cyclists. Jackson County has Bellevue State Park south of Bellevue, which houses a unique butterfly garden, and Clinton County offers Eagle Point Park, a large park on the north end of Clinton. Both parks offer fantastic views from bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. In addition, Jackson County has museums and galleries and Clinton County has museums, professional baseball, an arboretum, and a riverboat casino.

Scott County is much like Dubuque County, for both these counties are metropolitan areas with many types of activities for MRT cyclists. Scott County has Buffalo Shores Park in Buffalo and West Lake Park in Davenport. Besides parkland, the Iowa side of the Quad-Cities offers museums, an IMAX theater, local historic sites, professional baseball, the old East Village of Davenport, Vander Veer Botanical Gardens, and multiple riverboat gambling opportunities.

Muscatine and Louisa Counties each have a wealth of small parks along the Iowa MRT. Muscatine County boasts the Fairport Recreation Area, Saulsbury Bridge Recreation Area, Clark's Ferry Recreation Area, Shady Creek Recreation Area, and Wildcat Den State Park. Louisa County has the Lake Odessa Campground, Flaming Prairie Park, and an old ferry crossing in Oakville. In addition to these parks, these counties offer a wealth of history through local history museums in both counties, specialty museums, and the Toolesboro Indian Burial Mounds.

Des Moines and Lee Counties contain such amenities as the 4th Pumping Plant Recreation Area, Starr's Cave and Nature Center, the Christian Herschler Historic District Winery, museums, local historic sites, professional baseball, and art centers; each county also has its own riverboat casino.

Service Centers

The recommended Iowa segment of the Mississippi River Trail will attract both local and non-local cyclists to ride the trail in Eastern Iowa. Because of this, cyclists will need services along the trail. The Iowa portion of the MRT is unique because its towns are placed relatively close together, therefore eliminating a long trip without needed services. While most small towns located on the MRT will be more than adequate to provide food, rest stops, and lodging, the larger cities along the trail will offer more variety for those cyclists that desire such options.